

PART TWO

Discussions of
the Twelve 'Letters of Plato'

Translator's Notes to Part Two

1. The word which Ficino uses to name his discussion of a letter is 'argumentum', a word which suggests the theme or subject of a document.
2. The first letter is written by Dion, who, according to Ficino, 'not only heeded Plato's words but also put them into practice'.
3. Of the fifth letter, Ficino says that, although tradition ascribes it to Plato, 'it seems, in fact, to be from Dion, who is using all his powers to fashion Plato, in all respects, within himself.'
4. As with Part One, it is not the translator's intention to consider questions of authenticity, spuriousness, and dubiousness, but to present what Ficino says.



Discussion of the First Letter, Written by Dion

DION OF SYRACUSE, an undoubtedly great man, who not only heeded Plato's words but also put them into practice, immediately and open-heartedly gave back to the tyrant who banished him the money which the tyrant had previously sent him; and as a true follower of Plato he gave Dionysius the greatest blessing in return for the greatest wrong, by offering him three wholesome precepts.

The first of these precepts is that princes perish not from lack of funds but from lack of friends. The second is that there is no power greater than the unanimous support of good and prudent men. The third is that we should acknowledge the wrongs we have committed and see to it that, in view of the harm our wrong-doings have inflicted upon us, we shrink from any future transgressions.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Second Letter,
which Plato wrote to Dionysius,
Tyrant of Syracuse

IN THIS LETTER, which he writes to Dionysius the Younger after his first banishment by him, and after the expulsion of Dion, Plato says that there are four things to be observed above all others.

The first is that great power and wisdom seek one another through some natural impulse, so that they may come together in union. This is what we have found in the divine world, in nature, and in art.

Firstly, within the Godhead, God's boundless wisdom accompanies His limitless power. This is what he indicates by the names of Jupiter and Prometheus. He says that Jupiter is power, while Prometheus is providence. He considers power to be the fount of divine intelligence, and also its mirror; for we understand through the power to understand, and in understanding something we look upon its power.

Their marks are found in nature, too, for in those things which are compounds by nature – stones and minerals, plants and animals, and even the first things in the heavens – the natural composition is such that from the inward power of nature and from natural forces there arises a particular order within the forms of these things and within their actions and effects. But this order, manifesting outwardly and accompanying the inward force of power, is seen to reveal a degree of wisdom. For in its regulated movements nature's way is not different from that of wisdom, but their ways are identical in all respects.

In human art, too, both private and public, a similar harmony of power and wisdom is apparent. The natural capability of talent, memory, and will pertains to power. Once power has been acquired, wisdom arises from it, and the very order which pertains to wisdom is preserved in actions.

Of this mystery, which works through the divine world, nature, and art, we have examples in the fine custom which Plato mentions: the mutual friendship and, as it were, natural intimacy between the

powerful and the wise. On this matter he directs us to the heavens, in which the planets that indicate princes are closest to those that indicate the wise. For Jupiter is closest to Saturn, and the Sun hardly departs from Mercury. According to Plato, the rule of conduct arising from this is that princes should honour the wise, and the wise should freely counsel princes. For wisdom without power benefits few, and power divorced from wisdom is injurious to many.

Indeed, the greater the power, the more injurious it is when devoid of wisdom. And wisdom remote from power seems defective. This is shown by the great conjunctions of the planets, for Jupiter is the lord, and Saturn is the philosopher, but nothing great or lasting is wrought by them except they be in conjunction with each other.

Plato's meaning is that happy friendship arises between the powerful and the wise, while the happiest union of all occurs when power and wisdom are conjoined within a single soul. In such a soul resides the divinity of Pallas, uniting power with wisdom; for Pallas alone excels in the arts and brandishes her spear at the same time.

So far we have spoken of the first mystery of this letter. Let us now move on to the second mystery.

The operation of the soul which is raised up by goodness is to enjoy the Good which is fully divine and knows no limits. It is this which benefits most people for the greatest length of time. Such is the true glory of virtue, bestowing learning and good practices upon present and future generations.

Men, therefore, who are endowed with the best characteristics rejoice for two reasons in particular: because they love the light of virtue which shines in their heart, they also cherish the outer splendour of virtue; and because their constant wish is to benefit as many people as possible through this splendour, they rejoice in this continual benefit conferred upon the human race.

They rejoice, I say, as far as their perception extends; but since they strive to benefit posterity with unending glory, in the hope that they will rejoice then, as now, in this splendour and benefit, they predict that they will perceive it plainly once this life is over, for they are urged towards this immense benefit by the impulse of a more divine nature, not because they rejoice in it now but rather in order that they may rejoice in it. And if many types of creature, in the care they give, at nature's prompting, to their homes and food, do not look in vain to future use and enjoyment, much less will the outcome disappoint those divine souls who hope to enjoy some everlasting benefit.

The prophet Daniel understands the splendour and benefit of such virtue, both in his teaching and in his life, for he says: 'And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.'

But in some souls that decline from their own divinity the benefit which is the zeal of true glory is either extinguished or transformed into vainglory.

The third mystery of this letter reaches greater heights; but since we have expatiated upon it in the *Theology* and in the book *On Love*, it will be enough to give just a taste of it here. When we consider carefully the forms that are made by the craftsman, we gradually realise the principle on which they have been made; and when we apprehend the principles by which the craftsman makes the forms, these principles grant us easy access to the Ideas of the creative mind: those Ideas in accordance with whose patterns he has directed his own principles in order to produce the forms.

But just as, with man-made objects, we can proceed from forms to principles and can move from these principles to Ideas or models, so, in contemplating the natural order of things, we can acknowledge that the most beautiful forms of things are constructed on the most artistic principles; and if on principles, then on Ideas or models, according to whose likeness principle itself produces forms from its own level.

Thus there are three levels in the universe: that of forms, that of principles, and that of Ideas.

Now the level of forms, which are perceptible to the senses, is referred to the soul of the world, that soul which, as the beginning of movement, begets forms within matter, but begets different forms through different principles and seeds. We refer this level of principles within the soul to the mind, which is higher than the soul, that mind from whose Ideas the soul receives the principles for governing all things. Lastly, the level of Ideas comes down into the mind from the limitless and undivided glory of the divine Good, since the single Idea of good men, which is God Himself, infuses the angelic mind with the varied Ideas of varied good things.

For this reason, the three levels of things are related to three primary origins: the level of forms is related to the world-soul; the level of principles, to the angelic mind; and the level of Ideas, to the Good Itself.

And because all things are related to the Good through Ideas, Plato says, 'Around the King of All are all things', meaning that around the

Good Itself are Ideas and, through Ideas, all things. Around the second, or the mind, are the secondary items, the principles which follow the Ideas. Around the third are the tertiary items, that is, around the world-soul are the forms.

But when he says 'around', he means that God is the model cause of things. When he says 'by His grace', he means that God is the final cause; and when he adds 'He is the cause of everything beautiful', he means that God is the efficient cause, for the fact that some things are deformed is due not to what they receive from Him but to the extent to which they fall away from Him.

And it is not surprising that the followers of Plato wish it to be seen that Plato named each of those three primaries, for the names he gave them were similar but not identical. God, in fact, exists through Himself and the one Good. But since unity and goodness are limitless, it follows that God *is* through Himself absolutely. The supreme mind, being closest to God, *is* through God, inasmuch as it is something unitary and good, and also through itself, inasmuch as it is mind and at the level of the second nature. Lastly, the world-soul arises from the primal God, insofar as it is unitary and good; from mind, insofar as it is mind; and from itself, insofar as it is subject to movement.

This is the limit to which Plato says that the origins of things divine and the principles of all other things extend.

Moreover, he declares our soul to be divine when he adds that it strives after things divine but does not grasp them as long as it gazes upon those things which are related to it: the senses and whatever the senses perceive, or the forms conceived by the soul through encountering those things. For all these things are very different from things divine; and so the soul, gazing upon them, is obliged to feel and speak about divine matters as other than they are.

There follows the fourth mystery, concerning the perception of things divine. Initially, he says that the pursuit of the divine, not being carried out correctly, that is, not being organised according to the due steps of purification and discipline, is the cause of all evils, because those who pursue God wrongly eventually reach a point where they either deny the existence of God or state things about God which are not of God. This is how true religion perishes, and once religion has perished the flood-gates are open to all evils.

Secondly, he says that the impulse to pursue divine matters is the cause of evils; that is, if we misuse this impulse and use it in any way we wish, it obstructs the enjoyment of present delights and calms those

who, in this life, are panting for higher things. But what does he mean when he says 'Unless a man remove this impulse from his soul, he will never attain the truth'? He certainly says that the truth of things dependent on God cannot be had unless the truth about God be held first.

Moreover, through the words that he adds next you can understand that Plato himself often took great pains to pursue matters divine; and those who first heard Plato reflecting on the divine were instantly blinded by the overpowering brightness of the divine, and they were troubled for a long time, until they were finally able to separate the mind from the dispositions of the senses and from the projections of the imagination; and when this had happened through some divine dispensation or divine light, they began to discover the truth, which until then had been hidden.

It was for these reasons that Pythagoras, whom our Plato honoured in all matters, always began the holy mysteries of his teaching with the most scrupulous purification of the mind, and he always taught, just as Plato teaches, that those mysteries should not be divulged to the public, who, taking them amiss, would despise them or fall into error. For if you announce to the public that God has within Himself none of those things which are perceived through the senses, either they will laugh at you or they will say that there is no God.

Hence the words of Lysis, the follower of Pythagoras, to Hipparchus: 'It is not right to share the mysteries of philosophy with those who cannot even dream of the purification of the soul.'

There are, moreover, some mysteries of the theologians concerning God which would trouble not only the general public but also many cultured people. One of these mysteries is that nothing intelligible should be affirmed absolutely about God; for whatever is delimited by intelligence is bound to fall short of a God who transcends all limits.

Thus many erudite people are not ready for these deeper mysteries, just as the general public are not ready for less profound ones. The situation is such that although some people are equipped with shrewdness of intellect, a strong memory, and clear judgement, and although they have heard these things for a long time, they do not fully understand them; for even if they are born for other things, they are not born for matters theological; or if they are born for such matters, yet they are not adequately instructed and trained for them; and if they are so instructed and trained, then they have not been screened from inner agitations by the benefit of more mature years.

Now because agitation causes movements and distractions in various directions, and leads towards matter, it renders the mind a stranger to God, than whom nothing can be conceived that is further away from movement, from diversity, and from matter. Lysis was therefore justified in giving his warning to Hipparchus.

It is worth considering how much time we spent removing the stains imprinted on our hearts, before we were worthy and able to hear the precepts of Pythagoras. Moreover, anyone who betakes himself to God with a calm and well-instructed intellect will be quite deceived about God by his own intelligence, just as the general public are deceived by their senses and imagination, and just as many educated people are driven away by their own agitations. For intelligence, when judging according to its own nature, compels us to assert that God Himself is either an intellect of some kind or something intelligible.

But the limitless Good is not the intellect, which turns like a beggar towards the intelligible as towards something good from whose illumination it may gain some advantage; and it should not be described as the intelligible, which has a nature shared by the intellect, a nature through which it also has some similarity with intelligence. But there is no relationship or similarity between the limitless Good and the limited good things of nature.

Thus he shows in *Parmenides* that we have no name for God, no definition of God, and no knowledge of God, for He is beyond all the bounds of our understanding.

Prior to Plato, Hermes makes the same assertion; and subsequently to Plato, Dionysius the Areopagite does the same, showing that God cannot be described as an intelligible being, but is above both 'being' and 'intelligible'.

For this reason, since God infinitely transcends the intellect and the intelligible, no one can attain the divine substance by any action of the intelligence, but this substance can eventually be attained by devotion, I mean a propitious devotion, through the gracious work of the limitless Good that has been conveyed to us, conveyed, I say, into unity itself as the head of our mind, when the mind gathers itself wholly together from all directions into its own unity, which is the express image of divine simplicity. But because, under the divine Sun, it glimmers for the mind which is clothed with this unity, it completely departs when unity is removed and multiplicity is donned.

From all this it is quite clear that, in the view of our Plato, the divine cannot be discovered by us but is revealed to us from above; that the

substance and nature of the divine cannot be understood by the mind or explained in words or writings. These things should therefore be discussed and described with the hope that we may give encouragement through our words and writings and prepare souls for things divine, rather than offer proof.

This is why Plato writes nothing about the definition of the divine substance and the divine nature. He does, however, write a great deal which, through negations and narratives, exhortation and instruction, will one day lead to that state of mind to which the halls of almighty Olympus will open their gates.

When the mind has withdrawn itself to itself and away from all that is lower, and when it turns from itself to all that is higher, it immediately attains, at a single stroke, unity and steadfastness and simplicity, if I may express it thus. But what it attains, according to St Paul, it is unlawful for men to utter and, according to Plato, much more unlawful for men to write, lest what is holy be given to the dogs.

Yet although he trusts neither words nor writings with the explanation of matters divine, he considers it safer to entrust it to words than to writings, for writings become the property of all and sundry. However, he allows such words to be spoken to only the most carefully chosen people. But he judges that in all respects the worthiness of things divine requires us to communicate in words from mind to mind rather than by writing upon external materials.

For this reason, the Jews say that the mystical meaning of their Law was not communicated in writing by God Himself through Moses, but was rather entrusted to their souls. This is what they understood.

The followers of Pythagoras certainly observed this practice, and so did Plato. For even here he promises to send some things through Archedemus rather than in writing. But he declares that what he has written are the words of Socrates, whose real function was to purify.

But why does he add that Socrates, even in his youth, was beautiful, that is, enlightened by God? It is so that we may understand that Socrates, through the completion of his early education and through his own propitious nature, was quick to receive from God, through his personal daemon, those things which other people have difficulty in attaining even after long and arduous toil. It is also that we may understand that those mysteries which had been received through divine revelation had been communicated to Plato and can also be communicated, through Plato's counsels, to men of like disposition.

But in case someone is thinking that I have gone into a dream during this exposition, it is important to hear Proclus' confirmation of these things: 'For those who desire to attain the Highest Good, what is needed is not knowledge or the exercising of talent, but steadfastness, rest, and tranquillity. Indeed, it is divine faith which draws us and unites us ineffably to the Highest Good and to all that is divine. It is certainly not through knowledge or any action performed by our own wits that we should seek or aspire to the Highest Good, but we should offer and commit ourselves to the divine light and, with our senses stopped, we should come to rest in that unknown, hidden unity of all beings. For this kind of faith is more ancient than any teaching.'

It is clear that this is what Proclus has received from Plotinus. But anyone who considers these things carefully will not require of Plato the pattern of teaching which he usually adopts with the human disputants in his dialogues, but will be content simply with that style which takes a more direct route to God.

But such a style or arrangement consists in purifying and re-directing; for the mind's eye needs to be purified of the dark squalor of matter and, when cleansed, it needs to be rightly directed towards the light of the divine Sun. But it is not necessary to seek or to strive beyond this; for the boundless light, present everywhere through its own nature, floods the eye of the mind as soon as this eye, fashioned in its likeness, looks back to it in purity.

And if the intellect, in order to look up to God, earnestly applies its own inherent activity, which is something non-essential and multiple and, in its own way, subject to movement, it will certainly be separated in some way, through this activity, from the perfectly single substance of God and from all reflections of movement, however remote. It will therefore be sufficient, after appropriate examination, to have purified and re-directed the mind.

Hermes attributes all else to the sacred silence of the mind; for God, he believes, is known to the mind by His silence rather than by His words. This is why the dialogues of Plato focus on this point: some on purification alone, some on turning alone, and some on both. But these mysteries are re-affirmed in the letter to the Syracusans, and, being confirmed, wonderfully confirm in their turn the teachings of the Gospels.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Third Letter,
Written by Plato to the Tyrant Dionysius

THIS LETTER from Plato is written to Dionysius the Younger, after Plato's second banishment by him. He first answers some questions from Dionysius; then he rejects the charge levelled at him by Dionysius.

Thus, in answering a question, he teaches that within God there is none of that pleasure which has pain as its opposite and which consists in movement and in the satisfaction of some want. But he does not deny that within God there resides the whole of that good whose cause appears as good delight. He adds that the pleasure that is changeable is the cause of harm with regard to gains and honours and of pain with regard to the body; and that such pleasure destroys keenness of mind, memory, the power of judgement, and dignity.

Then, in answer to the charge made by Dionysius, Plato proves that, having set off for Sicily for the most just of reasons, he openly gave counsel on the restoration of previously derelict cities and on impartial government.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Fourth Letter,
Written by Plato to Dion of Syracuse

AFTER DIONYSIUS has been driven from his tyrannical position, Plato writes to Dion, who has now returned to his homeland, giving counsel to him and to Heraclides and Theodotus and other friends who held power in the state, that they should live as strangers to tyranny and hold to government by the aristocracy, moderated to some extent by the views of the people.

Here are some precepts to commit to memory: firstly, it is the duty of the leaders to excel all others in truth, justice, magnanimity, and temperance, and in all respects to excel all others in prudence as much as men excel boys in prudence; secondly, they should conduct themselves as they wish to be seen; thirdly, they should bear in mind that the eyes of all are turned upon them, and thus they would remember that their vices cannot be concealed and that they will not satisfy expectations with a virtue that is no more than average; fourthly, they should imitate the most upright lawgivers and avoid like the plague disharmony with their fellows; fifthly, they should remember that the common good is crucial in the conduct of their affairs, and that this can be obtained and preserved purely by the cultivation of the inner man.



Discussion of the Fifth Letter

ALTHOUGH TRADITION ascribes this fifth letter to Plato, it seems, in fact, to be from Dion, who is using all his powers to fashion Plato, in all respects, within himself.

The letter instructs Perdiccas, a leader established in a monarchy, to remember that he is a young man and thus stands in need of the counsel and service of older men: not of all older men, but of the most upright of them, and not in every matter, but in matters of ruling, for they understand the most fitting way to rule, whether it be rule by one, by a few, or by many.

The voice of government is its spirit and life, the law, which must establish and accomplish appropriate duties towards God and man. If it does not, it cannot survive.

But since Dion indicates that he and Euphreus, being filled with the teaching of Plato, are holding to those things which pertain to good civil order, and to prevent Perdiccas from despairing of this matter, especially since Plato himself never benefited his own people with citizenship training, he adds that Plato recognised that his people were suffering from an incurable disease, and for that reason, following the practice of prudent physicians, he had no wish to undertake, in vain and to his own peril, the healing of an incurable animal.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Sixth Letter, Written to Hermias, Erastus, and Coriscus

THE DIVINE Plato exhorts Hermias, Erastus, and Coriscus, princes of lands with common borders, to live in true harmony, prophesying that they will find safety solely in such harmony, by means of which, with the blessing of God, who delights in unity, they will acquire all good things and eventually reach that state in which, once all their affairs are properly settled, they will have the strength, as is only right, to pursue with whetted zeal that wisdom which is divine rather than human.

He states that lasting harmony can be established among them only by agreement that is lawful and is ratified by common consent through properly performed sacred ceremonies and through the taking of an oath, calling upon God Himself as their witness and praying to Him as the author and preserver of all unity: calling upon God and praying to Him, I say, with the uneven number in which, it is said, God delights. For in this letter Plato adduces the three principles of creation which he also touched upon in his first letter.

When he refers to the leader of all things present and future, he intends us to understand the soul of the world, which, being the principle of movement, uses the process of time to bring all things into the present from the future and to take all things from the present into the past. When he speaks of father and lord, he means almighty God and the Good itself. But midway between these two he seems to place a divine mind, because when he repeats 'of the leader' he adds 'and of the cause'.

For in the writings of Plato, 'the king' often stands for the Good itself, 'the cause' stands for the mind, and 'the leader' stands for the soul. And since Plato relates the cause to the mind, his followers reason in the *Timaeus* that the intellect is the child of the Good itself and the craftsman of the world. On this point there are the words in *Epinomis*: 'Reason most divine, or the most divine Word, decked the visible world'.

But here he calls the Good itself ‘father’ or ‘lord’, indicating by the first name the father of the mind, and by the second name the lord of the soul. This is perhaps the explanation that Platonic number will give, and likewise a Christian follower of Plato, albeit an Arian.

Perhaps, too, there will be someone who will be able to understand ‘leader’ as the Holy Spirit, and ‘mind’ as the Son. For when Plato says ‘father’, he includes the Son. And anyone who posits a single essence of the three will seem to fly in the face of many followers of Plato, but will not openly oppose them.

Now Plato encourages the weightier pursuits of learning together with the more delightful but related pursuits of fine speech, poetry, and music. He bids all men devote themselves to these pursuits, hunting out the divine fragrance through such clues, that they may come to love the divine fragrance alone and thus pursue the divine taste even further. He therefore says that if we consider God truly, or consider Him in this way – that is, if we pursue Him by loving Him, or love Him by pursuing Him – we shall all, beyond peradventure, eventually come to know Him.

Indeed, the name ‘philosophy’, although seeming to convey some sense of searching, in fact conveys love and a loving embrace. Thus Pythagoras recognised, as did Plato, that we have one relationship with good things which are finite, and a different relationship with the infinite Good: finite good things are known by us before they are loved, and when they are known they are thought worthy of being loved; but the infinite Good is loved before it is known, and is thought worthy of being pursued not because it is known but rather because it is loved. But why is it lovable before it is understood? This is because love, conveying the lover into the beloved, supplies what was lacking in the relationship and effects the transformation through desire.

In the scriptures, is not God often described as fire? By a similar metaphor, then, an angel is described as a transparent body, and the soul as an opaque body, that is, as long as the soul is enclosed in this dark dungeon. And so, just as, near fire, a diaphanous or transparent body, being like air or water, at once admits light from without and from within, while earthy bodies need to be vigorously heated and refined by the heat into the likeness of a diaphanous body before they can assume the fiery light, in the same way the spirits which are separate from the body receive the divine light immediately, while the spirits which are conjoined to earthy bodies require the fire of transforming love. When they are purified by this love and changed into the

divine likeness, they finally shine all around with the divine splendour of knowledge.

This is why Porphyry says: 'The inquiry into matters divine purifies the soul, but love deifies the soul.' For he truly expresses the situation with these words, and he is quite right to do so, since no material turns into fire from receiving light but from receiving fiery heat.

Hence the view of Plato is that we should pursue divine things, by which he means the things which are, and also such things as are objects of general observation, but that at the same time we should love them, not with a general love but with a singular and incomparable love; for in this way alone shall we be blessedly happy.

Only a profane man fails to understand the degree to which these words accord with holy writ.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Seventh Letter

THE SEVENTH LETTER of Plato was written to Dion's relatives and friends, after the country was given its freedom through the work of Dion and after Dion was unjustly put to death.

But in order that many things relating to history, both in this letter and in others, may be clearly understood, it is necessary to go over them a little more thoroughly.

Plato travelled three times to Syracuse: once at the age of forty, in the days of Dionysius the Elder; and twice later, when Dionysius the Younger ruled as the tyrant. But what he did on each of these journeys, or why he made them, can be found partly in the biography which we wrote of him and partly in these letters.

Now Dion seems to have been of the same family as Dionysius and to have had various other connections with him, since Dionysius had previously married Dion's sister, Aristomache, while Dion had married Dionysius' daughter, Areta. But Dionysius the Younger was not the son of Dion's sister but was the son of another wife, named Doras.

During Plato's first visit, Dion became one of Plato's 'hearers' and thus directed his life towards virtue and began to strive for the common weal of his country. And so, on the death of Dionysius the Elder, when Dionysius the Younger became the tyrant and, being still a child, was to be ruled in all respects by Dion's counsel, Dion chose to direct him towards a desire for the philosophic life and summoned Plato to Syracuse with many entreaties and also persuaded Dionysius to invite him.

Plato therefore complied, being drawn initially by the hope that through his counsel he would bring it about that the government would change from a tyranny to a republic or a monarchy. But about four months after Plato's arrival Dionysius, persuaded by false accusations, banished Dion as a conspirator against his tyranny. In spite of that, Dionysius was happy to embrace Plato. But Plato, displeased with the failure of his mission, returned to his own country.

He made the third journey with the aim of reconciling Dion and Dionysius, having been repeatedly entreated by both of them and having also been solicited by Archytas and Archedemus, as well as by very many noble followers of Pythagoras. Then Dionysius promised to recall Dion and to adopt the best form of government. Yet he did not keep either of these promises.

But when Plato openly withstood Dionysius because he had broken both his promise to him about recalling Dion and his promise to Theodotus about keeping Heraclides unharmed, he enraged Dionysius. And so Plato now lived in imminent danger of being killed by the soldiers. But Archytas of Tarentum sent the orator Salmiscus to Dionysius with a ship, asking him to send Plato away. Dionysius sent him away and gave him free passage. Plato returned to his own country safe and sound.

Shortly afterwards, Dion secretly raised an army, marched on Syracuse, drove out Dionysius, and gave the Syracusans their liberty once more. Dion, himself, however, was killed shortly afterwards through the evil intent and envy of his own men.

Then Hipparinus, Dion's son, and Hipparinus, Dionysius' brother and Dion's nephew through his sister, took control of Syracuse at the instigation of the nobles and began to consider how to govern more honourably. In the meantime Dionysius had gathered an opposing army and was seeking to return to power.

Plato therefore writes to them, encouraging them and directing them to follow the best type of government: a monarchy subject to laws and an aristocracy supported by authority. Such directives can be gathered from various parts of this letter. It is not strange for a man of good talent to choose the government of a republic, especially when necessity requires it; but it is strange for a good citizen to choose to have it when there is complete freedom of choice. It is not the role of a prudent man to involve himself rashly in public affairs, especially when he faces danger with the hope of public protection. In both public and private affairs it is philosophy alone that can discern what is good and just and what is not. The human race will not stop busying itself with evils until philosophers rule or until rulers practise philosophy under God's illuminating power. An upbringing based on pleasure and extravagance corrupts even divine minds. No immoderate man can be prudent. The state in which the citizens are intemperate no power of law can restrain from suffering frequent changes, always for the worse. Violence should never be used against one's country or

parents, but care should be taken to keep both of these far from violence. The authority of the ancients and of holy utterances should be preferred to all other opinions. Nothing evil can touch a good man. The soul detached from this body pays the penalty for its wickedness according to the sentence of the divine judge. It is better to suffer the most grievous harm than to inflict it. The grasping and the intemperate are so blind and deaf to matters divine that they themselves cannot see them, they cannot bear to hear of them from others, and if they *do* hear of them they do not grasp them. Irreligion is intermingled with all kinds of sins, and vice versa. Irreligion itself, mingling with sins, is the principal impulse whereby sinners are troubled in this life and tormented in the next.

Later, when he writes of his relationship with Dionysius and of his zeal for philosophy, he shows that no one will make any progress in philosophy unless he be afire with the love of wisdom and thus can bear all hardships for its sake and can scorn all pleasures.

But then, since it is the duty of the wise man to contemplate the divine, he takes this opportunity to show that the divine can never, and should never, be expressed to the general public in writing or by word of mouth: 'can never', because that which is greater cannot be fully comprehended by the mind; and 'should never', because those who are lowest in society would deride things divine as strange phenomena, while those who are a little higher in the social scale, if they were to hear of the divine, might fall into false heresy or become excessively vain and contentious through taking a light view of higher matters.

Nowhere does Plato say that nothing true and assured may be understood about matters divine, but he does say that what is understood of these matters cannot be expressed, and that their intrinsic truth is not understood by that reasoning power which understands everything else.

Indeed, some forms are fully united to bodies, while others are quite separate from bodies: the first are called natural, and the second are called divine. There are also other forms, which are in some way united to bodies and in some way capable of detachment from bodies: these are the rational souls, intermediate between things divine and things natural; they are united to bodies to the extent that they are of necessity detached from things divine, for they cannot be united to forms that are separated from matter, except through their own separation from matter.

Now they are separated from matter in two ways especially: by moral purification and by contemplative resolve. The study of philosophy effects both of these ways. Just as a man first dries damp wood in the sunshine before putting it on the fire, thus giving it the opportunity of catching fire, although it is the fire and not the man himself that burns the wood, so the study of philosophy prepares the soul for things divine by moral training and purification, and by contemplative training and resolve takes the mind to things divine and unites it to them, although the study itself does not shape the mind with divine truth, but God Himself, like the fire, fills the mind with the light of His truth, as if the mind were a substance prepared by the good work of philosophy and now brought nigh.

Therefore, when Plato said that divine matters cannot be expressed in writing or by word of mouth, he also meant that they cannot be taught or discovered by that reasoning power which discovers everything else. For in order to perceive other things our own searching prepares and shapes the intellect, but for the perception of things divine even the most purified and perfect search may prepare the intellect but does not shape it, and this is why Plato says that a long acquaintance with things divine is necessary – by which he means long practice of observation – as well as an integration or communion of life – by which he means a purification perfected by moral training.

He adds that the light of truth blazes upon a mind that is finally so disposed: its blaze is immediate and not, as in human fashion, gradual. But where does the blaze originate? It originates in fire, that is, in God, a fire that flashes out sparks. By sparks Plato means Ideas, the models of things in the divine mind. He also means the forms of the Ideas as they take their birth within us; the forms, previously hibernating through inactivity, are aroused by the breath of learning and, flashing forth like rays from the eyes, are illumined by the Ideas as by rays of starlight.

He adds that such a light is not merely kindled but is created within the soul, that he may show us that the forms are innate to the soul and that such splendour is familiar to us. But lest you should think that the mind is uncertain and agitated in such circumstances, he also adds: 'It – the primal light divinely kindled within the mind – now nourishes itself and then, by its own power, it draws in an abundance of divine rays and fills the mind with restorative joy. This soul nourishes itself – that is, seeking nothing outside itself, it lives content with itself – and the happiness which it experiences

inwardly it cannot and does not know how to express, even if it wishes to.'

In this contemplation Plato considers the five levels which you should study in our thorough exposition given in the *Theology*. For he directs the man who is desirous of the truth to begin by hearing the name of a thing; to proceed through sight and the other senses from the trappings of the thing to its definition; to move beyond the definition to the form that is inherent in the mind; and by means of this form to finally reach the Idea which creates forms and things.

He also teaches that an Idea is very different from the four other stages, because an Idea is a substance that is single, motionless, and free from all admixture with an opposite, while the other four – name, incidental manifestation, definition, conceptual form – fall away from the substance, the singularity, the steadfastness, and the purity of the Idea, and this is why they fail to impress the Idea upon us, although they do equip us, as far as they can, to receive the divine impress.

Finally, if a mind that has received the divine impress ever seeks to express the nature of Ideas in words and writings, it will produce nothing but deformed images of the most beautiful of all things. But if it puts its trust in the words of Pythagoras it will not strive to depict Ideas but will rather seek to refine the souls of those who hear and to polish them like writing-tablets on which the divine forms may eventually be depicted by the divine finger.

Such a mind, of course, receiving the heavenly rays, will not make a vain attempt to describe the forms of the rays to the blind. Indeed, if the blind are incurable, it will send them away; but if they are curable, it will seek merely to purify their vision and direct it aloft, that it may understand that its work for any other purpose would be futile.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Eighth Letter, Written to the Same Relatives and Friends of Dion

IN THE PREVIOUS letter Plato instructed the rulers of Syracuse and turned his attention generally to marriages, precepts, and the actions performed by himself and by Dion.

In this present letter he covers his earlier instructions more briefly, always keeping to a middle course between government by one man and government by the people, but striving most of all to ensure that citizens are reconciled rather than banished and that, as far as is possible, the status of a republic is rightly established without harm to anyone else.

Quite near the beginning he states that men defiled by irreligious wickedness are incurable and that no counsel will profit them. Again, whenever anything needs to be spoken or considered, one should start from God.

In the whole of this letter you will notice what a careful and merciful ruler Plato is, and how hard he works to reconcile souls. He gives his full approval, as he often does, to any government similar to that of Sparta, a government led by the aristocracy, with some permanent form of monarchy and with a touch of democracy.

He condemns slavery in its extreme form, in which everything is subordinate to man's lust. He also rejects all extreme forms of liberty, or licence, in which the government of the state is handed over without any discrimination whatsoever.

He approves of the middle course. Note his golden words: 'Service given to God is well-measured, but that given to men exceeds the measure. Law is the god of temperate men, but lust is the god of the intemperate.'



Discussion by Marsilio of the Ninth Letter

IN THIS LETTER to the philosopher Archytas, who is preoccupied with public affairs, Plato counsels contemplatives not to shirk actions which are honourable and needful; for, he says, actions which are honourable and needful are those that benefit humanity both publicly and privately.

Such actions are honourable because, just as each part of the body lives not for itself but for the other parts and, most importantly, for the whole body, so human beings live for others and, most significantly, for the whole human race.

Such actions are also needful, because unless you live for others you cannot live for yourself, and unless you succour your household and your country, the ship of home and state, being deprived of its helmsman, will pitch and roll, or, if worse men are at the helm, it will founder and eventually be wrecked.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Tenth Letter

PLATO CONFIRMS the views and life of Aristodemus, a friend of Dion and a man of gracious ways, who pursues philosophy first and foremost.

Plato declares that the substance of philosophy is moral virtue, which, he explains, is characterised by love and virtue. He says that man's reflections are either the outer adornments of philosophy or the ways of good living for the attainment of steadfast purity of mind.

After the attainment of this purity, which is divine rather than human and which, rather than being acquired, is imparted from above, there follows contemplation, to which the earlier reflection is directed and which Plato calls a game; but it is the most important direction given by Pythagoras and Socrates.

Now the word which we have translated as 'adornments' means in Greek 'adornments that are shot through with artful vanity and pride', as if Plato were saying, 'Knowledge puffs up; love builds up' or 'Wisdom will not enter a soul that is bent on evil'.

But Plato finds sincerity and wholeness in a soul that is simple and peaceful; trustworthiness in what it says; and steadfastness in its activities and actions.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Eleventh Letter

TO THE REQUEST from the ruler Laodoman about the best type of rule Plato gives his usual counsel: all laws are futile unless the most upright men, through whom the laws live, wield great power in the state and unless there is established within the state a judiciary with plenipotentiary powers which will act as a moral censor in keeping a close watch, through its spies, on the actions of individual citizens, with the constant aim of leading souls to courage and temperance through the daily life of the citizens.



Discussion by Marsilio of the Twelfth Letter

THE TWELFTH LETTER demonstrates to us Plato's magnanimity and simplicity, for he entrusted to Archytas some of his more recondite commentaries before they were polished.

The theme of the letter is that Archytas, who studied philosophy more in words than in practice, was worthy to receive at this time those things which are most precious. But perhaps the aim was to complete the *Critias* commentary, which was as yet unfinished, and to arrange the *Hermocrates*, which was not yet in its final order.

As for the letter to Dionysius, which ignorant people attach to the commentaries, we have not translated it, because all the learned men say that its words are not Plato's words.

However, it is worth noting in these letters the magnanimity and constancy displayed by our Plato, especially in matters that concerned his friends, and the serious dangers which he braved to protect a friend. We should note, too, the generosity and kindness with which he quite frequently rebuked the tyrant, being more of a stranger to flattery than anyone else but yielding to no one in love and duty, in order that he might be able, as much by his life and character as by his discussions, to help us to live well and happily.

